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NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE ISLE OF PINES, CUBA

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WHILE making a study of Sandhill Cranes, we found there was a dearth of material on the Cuban Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis nesiotus*) and decided to spend a short time studying the species on the Isle of Pines during late March, 1945, hoping to be there during the nesting season.

The Walkinshaws landed at Nueva Gerona March 13, 1945, leaving on March 24; the Bakers landed March 17 and left March 26. The Walkinshaws spent March 13 to 15 at Nueva Gerona; March 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, and 24 at Santa Barbara; March 17 and 19 at 'Sabana Grande' (March 19 with Bernard Baker); March 20 and 22 at Los Indios. Late during the day of March 24 they left Santa Barbara for Nueva Gerona and the 'Black Sands' area in the northeastern portion of the island. The Bakers spent March 17 at Nueva Gerona; March 17 (evening) to March 24 at Santa Barbara (except March 19); March 24 to 26 at Nueva Gerona, with a trip to the 'Black Sands' on March 24.

The Isle of Pines belongs to the Republic of Cuba and is located in the Caribbean Sea, the northern end of the island lying about 81 miles by air south from Habana, Cuba. It extends north and south about 35 miles and slightly less across, except along the 'South Shore' where it is nearly 40 miles across. The 'South Shore' is cut off by a large swampy area, the 'Gran Cienega de Lanier,' so that travel from the northern end of the island to the southern portion is not possible except by boat.

The soil is rather rocky, sparingly covered on the northwestern portion, where we did most of our work, with grasses, shrubs, some other plants, and scattered groups of pines and palms—tropical pine (*Pinus tropicalis* Morelet), often associated with bottle palm (*Colpothrinax Wrightii* Griseb. and Wendl.) and in places with such palms as *Acoelorrhapha Wrightii* (var. *novo-geronensis*) and *Coccothrinax Miraguama*; grasses: *Paspalum conjugatum* Bergius, and *Imperata brasiliensis* Trin.; sedges: *Rhynchospora*; Rubiaceae: *Rondeletia correifolia*

Griseb.; Bignoniaceae: *Tabebuia lepidophylla* (Griseb.) Rich.; Mimosaceae: *Pithecellobium arboreum* (L.) Urb.; Caesalpinaceae: *Cassia hispidula* Vahl.; Fabaceae: *Aeschynomene tenuis* Griseb., *Centrosema virginiana* (L.) Benth., *Clitoria guianensis* (Aubl.) Benth., *Brya ebenus* (L.) D.C., some species of *Galactia*. Samples of all of these except the palms and palmettos were collected and were identified by Brother Léon of the Colegio de La Salle, Habana, Cuba.

The plant associations have been described by Brother Marie-Victorin and Brother Léon (1942:261-304; 1944:143-166). They also gave some very good descriptions of the island.

The island is mostly one large savanna, slightly rolling in places, with small, rocky mountain ranges. There are two ranges at Nueva Gerona, one to the east and a small one to the west. The Sierra de la Canada is a more extensive range in the region of Los Indios and eastward. The northwestern portion of the island, several thousand acres, is a great, almost treeless savanna, most of it belonging to an American, Ed Percy. This area has been fenced and is pastured to a large herd of cattle.

Jean Gundlach did ornithological work on the Isle of Pines, published as follows: Cabanis, 1854-57; Thienemann, 1857; Gundlach, 1862, 1875, 1873-76. Outram Bangs and W. R. Zappey (1905) published considerable material on the birds of the island. W. E. Clyde Todd (1916) published on the extensive work that Gustav A. Link did there. Thomas Barbour (1923, 1943) and James Bond (1936, 1945) have also worked on the island.

Although we did not have access to weather reports, we made records of temperature, of sunrise and sunset, wind direction, and weather. Temperatures were consistently warm, with daytime ranges of 68° to 82° at 6:30 a.m., 84° to 88° at noon, 77° to 82° at 6:30 p.m. Except for a semi-cloudy day on March 20, the weather was clear, with the wind in the southeast until March 22 and 23, when it veered to the north.

The following bird observations were made:

Cormorant. *Phalacrocorax auritus* subsp.

One observed along the Caribbean Sea in the 'Black Sands' area March 24.

Great Blue Heron. *Ardea herodias* subsp.

One observed along a small creek near 'Sabana Grande' March 17.

American Egret. *Casmerodius albus egretta* (Gmelin)

Four observed near 'Sabana Grande' March 19.

Green Heron. *Butorides virescens* subsp.

One was observed at Rancho Rockyford, March 18, flying from tree to tree along the arroyo.

Turkey Vulture. *Cathartes aura aura* (Linnaeus)

The most conspicuous bird on the Isle of Pines.

Marsh Hawk. *Circus cyaneus hudsonius* (Linnaeus)

Three were observed coursing over the open country, two on March 22, and one March 23.

Cuban Sparrow Hawk. *Falco sparverius dominicensis* Gmelin

This hawk was found sparingly on the open pine plains. Baker found a nest in a post along the highway on March 18; it contained three eggs. A Sparrow Hawk was observed chasing a Turkey Vulture March 14 at Nueva Gerona, the vulture finally alighting in a tree. Sparrow Hawks were observed at Nueva Gerona, Santa Barbara, Los Indios, and on 'Sabana Grande.'

Cuban Bob-white. *Colinus virginianus cubanensis* (G. R. Gray)

A flock of nine was observed between Rancho Rockyford and Santa Barbara March 15, resting during the heat of the afternoon in a mass of low growth on the pine plains. On March 16, at Rancho Rockyford, Colonel E. C. Morton observed two flocks whose calls were also heard. A covey was seen often near Santa Barbara March 18, and a covey was heard calling at daylight near Los Indios, March 20.

Cuban Sandhill Crane. *Grus canadensis nesiototes* Bangs and Zappey

Evidently this species was much more common during the time of Gundlach (1875:293) than it is now. Barbour (1943:48-49) stated that cranes were becoming rarer in Cuba but were not uncommon on the Isle of Pines. There cannot be many cranes left. All the natives remarked how rare they were becoming.

For two days we rode horseback across 'Sabana Grande,' hoping to see a flock of 10 observed March 14 by Ed Percy. No trace of them was found except tracks along a water hole in one of the arroyos on March 17. On March 20, Walkinshaw rode horseback down to Los Indios across the Sierra de la Canada and stopped at the Hedin residence. Lawrence Hedin said that the cranes used new burns for feeding, evidently picking up dead insects and lizards. Hedin had burned part of his pasture field two days earlier (a custom all over the island), and cranes had already used it as a feeding spot. We immediately walked across the pine- and palm-covered pasture; on an open dry flat, near a small arroyo with some water, we found three cranes feeding in typical crane fashion, always one or more "on guard." After some time we approached them carefully, and soon they flushed, flying just over the tree tops to the southwest, landing about half a mile away. They gave the loud sharp alarm note *garooooo-oo--garooooo-oo--garooooo-oo* exactly like that of the Greater Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*), both on the ground and in the air. We searched carefully for them, and they did not fly but apparently slunk away amongst the pines, for

we did not see them again. Hedin reported them on the burn again March 22. These cranes were much browner than the captive bird we saw at Santa Barbara (see below).

Walkinshaw returned alone through the mountains that same afternoon. While crossing a small arroyo with some water, surrounded by foothills covered sparingly with pines, bottle palms, and trees resembling saw-palmettos, he discovered two cranes only 150 feet in front of his horse. They were walking along the bank of the stream and flew across, landing only 100 yards away, giving the trumpeting alarm call in unison while he searched the spot for a possible nest. Soon they slunk quietly across the plain and disappeared. From their behavior he judged that they had their territory selected—though our party could find no trace of them at daylight the following morning. The Walkinshaws found a pair feeding shortly after sunrise March 22 along the same mountain slope. When approached, the cranes flew over the more westerly foothills. Both Lawrence Hedin and Peter Smellie (a Scot living about eight miles east of Los Indios at the base of a high mountain) heard cranes the morning of March 22.

Thus during 63 hours in the field on March 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, and 22, while searching specifically for cranes, Walkinshaw saw only seven cranes. During this time, at least 19 miles were covered on foot, 24 by car, and 62 by horseback. During an equal amount of time spent in any part of the United States or Canada where cranes occur, many more cranes will be observed—even in areas such as Mississippi and southern Michigan.

One Cuban found nests in shallow water at 'Sabana Grande' about three feet from shore, but all of the other natives who had found nests said they were on dry land. Peter Smellie told of finding a nest in late April about 1932 situated on a pine- and palm-dotted savanna along the Sierra de la Canada, east of Los Indios. The two eggs were laid on dry ground beside a small tree far from water. He took the eggs and placed them under a hen, but they did not hatch. Hedin captured a young Sandhill Crane, standing about nine inches high, during the 1930's and tried to raise it, but it was caught and eaten by a large snake. A downy crane was captured about 10 miles west of Santa Barbara during late May, 1943, and brought to the ranch of Silbio Gargiulo, where we saw it in March, 1945 (Plate 4). Except for a drooping wing caused by wing-clipping, it appeared healthy. Like other Cuban Sandhill Cranes it very much resembled the Lesser Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis canadensis*), having much shorter tarsi than the Greater Sandhill Crane and the Florida Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis pratensis*). The bird was giving the adult call, and he fed around the yard, eating grasshoppers and other insects, earthworms, and lizards, as well as corn which was fed to him. He was heard calling



Captive Sandhill Crane (age 2 years, 10 months) at Santa Barbara, Isle of Pines.

on March 19 at 6:35 a.m. just before sunrise, as other cranes often do. This call was much less shrill than the alarm cry. No one was disturbing him, and it was evidently a natural call. Most of the time he was allowed his freedom, and he fed for a mile or more along the stream. We heard that several cranes had been shot over him as a decoy during the summer of 1944. These were eaten by the natives who shot them. Many of the natives remarked how good cranes were to eat, and many of them had tried to raise young at some time or other.

We had hoped to find the nest of the Cuban Sandhill Crane, but we learned from the natives that the cranes nested in late April and May, the rainy period on the island. This is several months later than the nesting season in Florida.

Purple Gallinule. *Porphyryla martinica* (Linnaeus)

Walkinshaw observed one March 18 and Baker one March 23 at Rancho Rockyford. On both occasions the bird was climbing around among the horizontal or nearly horizontal branches of trees along the stream.

Killdeer. *Charadrius vociferus* subsp.

Two were observed over the river March 15 at Nueva Gerona and two at Nueva Gerona March 24. In both cases they were calling.

Lesser Yellow-legs. *Totanus flavipes* (Gmelin)

Two were observed along the 'Black Sands' in the northeastern portion of the island March 24.

Mourning Dove. *Zenaidura macroura* subsp.

Very common in the grapefruit orchard at Rancho Rockyford and near by.

Cuban Ground Dove. *Columbigallina passerina insularis* Ridgway

Observed at 'Sabana Grande' in the pine areas March 17, first a lone bird, then two. Three more were observed there March 19 and two near Los Indios March 20.

Cuban Parrot. *Amazona leucocephala leucocephala* (Linnaeus)

A fairly common species, several times observed in small flocks of from 2 to 25 in grapefruit orchards, where they often sat twisting the stems of the unripe grapefruit until the fruit dropped to the ground. Flocks were observed at Rancho Rockyford, Santa Barbara, and at Los Indios. The parrots were very noisy while flying and often while feeding.

Isle of Pines Lizard Cuckoo. *Saurothera merlini decolor* Bangs and Zappey

Observed almost daily in tangles of trees and shrubs, often gracefully hopping from branch to branch, their long tails swinging from side to side or up and down and at times bent forward over the back. Their loud raucous call, *Ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca*, was one of the earliest

heard in the morning and one of the latest in the evening. It rose sharply on the second and third syllables, dropped on the fourth.

Smooth-billed Ani. *Crotophaga ani* Linnaeus

These ungainly birds were found daily around a bamboo thicket at Rancho Rockyford, sometimes in a flock of from 12 to 15 individuals. They were also observed in the region of 'Sabana Grande.' At times their shrill call could be heard ringing through the grapefruit orchard near our cabin, and small groups could be found there. Often in the early morning they sat near a bamboo thicket across the stream, sunning themselves, wings and tail half-spread, drooping ungracefully from their bodies.

Cuban Pygmy Owl. *Glaucidium siju* (d'Orbigny)

Observed daily (Figure 1) from March 16 to March 23 at both Rancho Rockyford and Los Indios. Its call was very shrill, similar to the syllables *tio-tio-tio-tio-tio*. The call was usually given just at the break of day or at dusk, but it was sometimes heard by day from some dense spot in the top of a palm. These owls also flew about sometimes during the day. At daylight on March 16, a pair was observed in front of our cottage in a grapefruit tree. They were heard calling, and then as the female sat on a horizontal branch the male copulated with her, his wings vibrating rapidly.

Cuban Emerald Hummingbird. *Chlorostilbon ricordii ricordii* (Gervais)

One or two seen on several days, feeding on flowers in the yards at Santa Barbara and Los Indios.

Belted Kingfisher. *Megaceryle alcyon* (Linnaeus)

One was observed along a stream at Santa Barbara March 17, and its familiar rattling call was heard.

Cuban Tody. *Todus multicolor* Gould

These dainty flycatcher-like birds (Figure 2) were found on three occasions in the grapefruit orchard near the pool at Rancho Rockyford, and one was observed about two miles from there March 21. Sometimes we could approach within three feet of them. They usually remained in deep shade. Suddenly they would dash out from their perch, capture some passing insect, and dash back to another branch, quivering their wings. Their contrasting colors and their sharp call, *ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti*, helped locate them easily.

West Indian Red-bellied Woodpecker. *Centurus superciliaris murceus*
Bangs

Observed daily at Rancho Rockyford (Plate 3), near Santa Barbara, and on March 20 at Los Indios. They were often rather noisy, feeding singly or by twos.

Cuban Green Woodpecker. *Xiphidiopicus percussus insulae-pinorum*
Bangs



Figure 1. Cuban Pygmy Owl, eight miles east of Los Indios, Isle of Pines, March 22, 1945.



Figure 2. Cuban Tody, Santa Barbara, Isle of Pines, March 16, 1945.



Figure 3. Greater Antillean Pewee, Santa Barbara, Isle of Pines, March 23, 1945.



Figure 4. Western Red-legged Thrush, Santa Barbara, Isle of Pines, March 23, 1945.